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ABSTRACT

Although junior colleges were originally established to provide the first two years of collegiate instruction, the mission of today's community college includes providing not only transfer education, but also certificate or associate degree vocational programs, adult continuing education, and community services. Therefore, the community college can no longer be evaluated solely on the basis of the number of students who graduate. The inadequacy of this evaluation method is reflected in the growing number of students taking advantage of the community college's service/continuing education component. A full 50% of the 1975-76 enrollment in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), for example, was in non-curricular areas such as career exploration, job skill improvement, and personal development. In recognition of this fact, the VCCS takes this non-curricular enrollment, as well as the number of graduates, into consideration when evaluating individual college performance. The time has come for other institutions to follow this lead and measure institutional success by the degree to which a student's goals are being achieved, and not by the goal of graduation as set by upper-echelon administrators. (JP)

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SHOULD GRADUATION BE THE ONLY CRITERION FOR SUCCESS?

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ABSTRACT

The three-pronged mission of the community college is explored and it is argued that the service function must not be overlooked in favor of the number of graduates when accountability measures are taken. The service function is growing and often exceeds the two other functions (occupational/technical training, and college parallel transfer programs) in the number of students reached. Careful consideration to the service function is encouraged since this is such a large part of the community college's actual practice. Members of the community are telling us what they want in terms of education from the community college and planners are urged to listen.

SHOULD GRADUATION BE THE ONLY CRITERION FOR SUCCESS?

The Changing Mission

Community colleges, as we know them today, are the result of a long process of educational evolution. In the mid 1800's there was a move afoot on the part of several major universities to make the first two years of collegiate education part of the high school program. This was intended to relieve the universities from the burden of educating those students who were not quite mature enough to take part in serious scholarly endeavors. Advocates of this point of view believed that the high schools should provide an additional two years of preparation of such students.

While the universities never completely eliminated the lower division from their curriculum, the two-year junior college began to emerge offering the Associate degree to those who completed a two-year program of study. Such degrees were already being conferred in several universities, but it was the new, two-year college which offered it as its only degree. For the most part, the programs offered at the junior college were designed to prepare students to transfer to the university and therefore its curriculum paralleled that of the universities' lower division. In 1922 the American Association of Junior Colleges offered this statement reflecting the mission of the junior college at that time:

> The junior college is an institution offering two years of instruction of strictly collegiate work.

Since then, the junior college has adopted the name

community college to reflect its changing commitment to serve the local constituency in a number of ways in addition to providing traditional educational programs.

A Three-Pronged Curriculum

Offering only college parallel or transfer programs is no longer the mainstay of most community college, although it does serve a vital function at many. As a matter of fact, we are seeing more and more students beginning their baccalaureate studies at the community college. They are doing so in large enough numbers to spur the development of the upper-division university, such as those found in Florida, which do not offer freshman or sophomore level course-work. While actual numbers of students following this pattern is increasing, their proportion to other students in the community college is decreasing.

In addition to providing quality transfer programs, the comprehensive community college also provides training and educational preparation for direct job entry. These programs include all the career, technical and occupational curricula which consist of one-year certificate and diploma programs as well as the two-year associate of applied science degree. Although many students entering the community college state aspirations of transferring to a university, it is not unusual to see around half of this group change to one of the job-entry programs after some soul-searching and reality testing. These programs may be composed of many of the standard curricula such as secretarial science, business, auto mechanics, and allied health as well as some curricula which are peculiar to the individual community. For instance, courses of study can reflect the needs of unusual or regional industries.

Forestry may be quite popular in some locations while nuclear technology, recreation leadership, or hotel-motel management may be appropriate in others.

A third facet of the curriculum is represented by the adult or continuing education and community service components which provide opportunities for people to up-grade their job skills or to gain knowledge and skills for their personal satisfaction. In some cases these are non-credit classes while in others they may be part of a degree program without the intention of completing the requirements. By making such opportunities available, the two-year college is truly a community college.

The role of continuing education will become more and more important as the rate of knowledge and technology accelerates. For example, Abbott[1] has estimated that by the time a child born today reaches his fiftieth birthday, 97% of the knowledge in existence will have been learned in his lifetime. The comprehensive community college has recognized this fact and has made appropriate accommodations for members of its service area to keep pace with the rapidly changing world.

Measuring Success

The three-pronged curriculum makes the community college unique among institutions of higher education. Because the role and mission is different from that of other types of colleges, the degree to which it successfully fulfills its objectives must be measured by different criteria.

For instance, the State Council of Higher Education

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[1]Abbot, W. Work in the year 2001. The Futurist, 1977, 25-31

for Virginia has recognized the service component of the community college mission in its recommendations for continuance of individual degree programs. Specific guidelines for the number of graduates per program per year have been established, however, each community college is required to justify the service function when the criteria for graduates are not met.

To put this situation in perspective, it will be helpful to look at some enrollment and graduation data. For purposes of this example, figures from the 1975-1976 school year of the Virginia Community College System will be presented. As Table 1 shows, the total enrollment in the Fall of 1975 was 86,810 while the total number of graduates for that school year was 6,709 or 7.7% of the total enrollment. Perhaps the most startling figure is the number of non-curricular students. This group has always constituted a large share of the enrollment but it was not until lately that this category was sub-divided in Virginia to yield specific information on students' reasons for attending. As it stands now the Virginia Community College System uses no less than ten sub-divisions for non-curricular classification to include Career Exploration, Up-grading Job Skills for Present Job, Developing Employment Skills, Personal Satisfaction and Transient Student, for example.

Table 1

Virginia Community College System

Enrollment and Graduation Figures

1975-1976

	Enrollment		Graduates	
Classification				
A.A./A.S. Degree	11,832	(14%)	1,948	(28%)
A.A.S. Degree	18,873	(22%)	3,478	(52%)
Certificate	4,090	(5%)	1,176	(18%)
Diploma	809	(1%)	157	(2%)
Developmental*	7,044	(8%)		
Non-Curricular	44,162	(50%)		
Total	86,810	(100%)	6,709	(100%)

*Students in remedial courses

The figures in Table 1 clearly show that to judge the success of the community college's mission on the basis of the number of graduates is misleading to say the least. The service function is playing a strong part in bolstering enrollment figures. Perhaps success should be measured by the degree to which the students' intended--goals are being met, and not by the goal of graduation as set by upper-echelon administrators. The time has come to scrutinize current methods of evaluation and replace outmoded criteria. If the community college is going to be a college

of and for the community then the service function cannot be ignored as a measure of its viability.

A Need for Evaluation

Most institutions of higher education, and the community college is no exception, are facing demands to be accountable for all facets of their functioning. Accountability implies identifying goals and objectives and then demonstrating the extent to which they are met. Since the community college has three separate educational goals, each should be assessed differently.

Typically, the success of the two types of degree program is measured in terms of the number of graduates produced each year. Additionally, follow-up studies on the academic success of transfer students should be conducted as a better measure of the community college parallel program. Employment in a field related to the training received out to be the criterion used in assessing the occupational/technical curricula. Finally, enrollment figures alone can be used as justification for the service function of the curriculum.

The fact remains that the burden of proof clearly rests with the individual community college that it is fulfilling its multi-faceted mission. A systematic follow-up and evaluation process is necessary, not only to demonstrate accountability, but also to aid in curriculum planning and development. This process will ensure that the community college is meeting the needs of the community it serves, as well as supplying evidence to the powers that be.

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